

M. CHEVALIER'S 'PASCAL'*

THE fortunes of Blaise Pascal, that brilliant genius and highly-gifted soul, would now seem to be in the ascendant. Ever since his death he has suffered at the hands of editors and critics, beginning with the *Pensées* of Port Royal, going on to the calumnies of Voltaire, ending with his adoption by the nineteenth century sceptics. It is only in recent years that Pascal has received his due, and M. Chevalier's book is the final stage in this rehabilitation. Nor is it merely that the charges against him have been proved to be false, for there is a positive growth in his fame; he is coming to be recognised as a Christian apologist of an original and persuasive quality. It is to France that we naturally look for an interpretation of this great Frenchman, and much has been written there about him in recent years; but there is no book, we believe, which is equal to M. Chevalier's in its masterly account of Pascal's life and in its just and sympathetic exposition of his religious philosophy.

For a long time, unquestionably, Pascal's reputation has suffered among Catholics from his association with Jansenism and from his unfortunate quarrel with the Society of Jesus. In the partisan dust raised by those controversies his chief work and true significance were almost completely obscured. We shall say very little about them, except this that in the matter of the *Provinciales* M. Chevalier seems to us rather lenient to Pascal. But the Fathers of the Society have probably long forgiven him for that brilliant but unscrupulous

* *Pascal*. Par Jacques Chevalier. (Paris, Plon-Nourrit et Cie, 1922, etc.)

The same, translated by Lilian A. Clare. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1930; 15/- net.)

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satire, and are as ready as anyone to enjoy the wit and eloquence of their critic. Was Pascal a Jansenist? M. Chevalier is very fair in his treatment of this question, giving all the pertinent facts in full and concealing none which might appear to conflict with his thesis, which is, that Pascal, despite all external associations, was never a Jansenist at heart. Twice he was nearly entrapped, twice by his zeal for truth and his profound humility he escaped from the narrowness of the Jansenist doctrines. Nor could a man go far astray whose faith is expressed in these words: 'The body can no more live without the head than the head without the body. Whoever separates himself from the one or the other is no longer of the body, and no longer of Jesus Christ . . . We know that all the virtues, martyrdom, austerities and all good works profit us nothing if we separate ourselves from the Church and from communion with the head of the Church, who is the Pope. I will never be separated from its communion. At least I pray God to grant me that grace without which I should be eternally lost.' (Brunschvicg, p. 219). He was granted that grace, for after a struggle he submitted humbly and completely to the Church. M. Chevalier's summing up is admirable: 'No doubt it was on account of this [his tinge of Jansenism] that he gave such prominence to original sin, and derived such exaggerated consequences from it in all that concerns our corrupt human nature. His mind, however, liberal, powerful, yet absolutely *undeviating*, gainsaying the Jansenist doctrine, abandoned the *sect* to go direct to the *truth*. When he attacked reason, it was with all the powers and resources that reason affords; when he defined its limits, it was that he might the better indicate its greatness, which consists in submitting to reality. Lastly, the sole fact that he undertook the conversion of the unbeliever bore witness to his conviction that man's liberty of choice plays a part in his

conversion, and that even if the divine help be always freely given it may yet be solicited. In his method, mind and profound humanity, Pascal was not a Jansenist. He tempered Jansenism with humanism; he surpassed it by the purity and intensity of his spiritual life' (Eng. tr., p. 100).

That is an example of the careful and objective treatment accorded by M. Chevalier to the problems of Pascal's life. Taking as his principle, 'Back to the text,' he judges his author's sentences on their own merits, without the intrusion of controversy, and sets them in relation to their whole context. In acting so he is only following the principle laid down by Pascal himself in one of his *Pensées* (ed. Brunshvicg, No. 684): *Pour entendre le sens d'un auteur, il faut accorder tous les passages contraires*. As an illustration of the application of this method to Pascal himself, take the case of that best known, yet least understood, of the *Pensées*: *Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas*. M. Chevalier shows by reference to other passages that Pascal the sentimentalist, the forerunner of the emotionalist, fideist school, is a myth. The seventeenth century had a very special meaning for the word *cœur*, so that Pascal can write: 'We know the truth, not only by reason, but also by the heart (=intuition); it is by this latter method that we know first principles, and vainly does reasoning, which has no part therein, try to combat them.' (*Pensée* 282). That is a vitally important passage for understanding Pascal's point of view; he denies neither our power of right reasoning, nor the certainty of our knowledge of first principles. If he emphasises the limitations of human reason, he is neither a sceptic nor an idealist.

Perhaps his greatest claim upon our attention—and this has only recently become apparent—is as an apologist and in his appeal to history for the proof of Christianity. M. Chevalier quotes Père Lagrange as

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saying that this is 'his finest thought and his best writing.' Cardinal Newman was not afraid to follow him along this road, for in the crucial chapter of his *Grammar of Assent* he quotes the famous *Pensée* (No. 289) which marked a revolution in Christian apologetics: 'Consider the establishment of the Christian religion; here is a religion contrary to our nature, which establishes itself in men's minds with so much mildness, as to use no external force; with so much energy, that no tortures could silence its martyrs and confessors; and consider the holiness, devotion, humility of its true disciples; its sacred books, their superhuman grandeur, their admirable simplicity. Consider the character of its Founder; His associates and disciples unlettered men, yet possessed of wisdom sufficient to confound the ablest philosopher; the astonishing succession of prophets who heralded Him; the state at this day of the Jewish people who rejected Him, and His religion; its perpetuity and its holiness; the light which its doctrines shed upon the contrarities of our nature; after considering these things, let any man judge if it be possible to doubt about its being the only true one.' We know what admirable use Newman made of the argument from the constancy of the martyrs in his final chapter of the *Grammar*.

M. Chevalier is confessedly an admirer of Pascal and his book is written in defence and in praise of his hero. But we believe that he has proved his points and that he is justified in his praise. Pascal has indeed been fortunate in his biographer, who is singularly well equipped for his task; for he is a scientist, a philosopher and a Catholic, and Pascal was all three. How many people realise that he was one of the greatest mathematicians of his age and a distinguished inventor besides? While as a Catholic, his writings have the unction of a St. Augustine, his austerities were those of a saint, and his death was sublime.

All this, and much besides, will be found in M. Chevalier's book, and English readers owe a real debt to the translator who has put this treasury at their service. For the translation, even if it be not always all that it should be, will give them access to the treasury. The English is sometimes lame and halting, and sometimes it is in a language which we might call 'translator's English,' that is to say, the vocabulary is correct, but the form and flow of the sentence are definitely foreign. Nor is the version always free from mistake, as we may illustrate by three examples, from pages 62, 76 and 111 respectively. In the first, speaking of an hypothesis, the author cites this passage of Pascal: 'Car quelquefois on conclut un absurde manifeste de sa négation, et alors l'hypothèse est véritable et constante,' which is rendered: 'For sometimes we conclude a thing absurd through its negation, and then the hypothesis is true and unvarying.' Either this is very odd English for 'We reach an absurd conclusion through its negation,' or else the translator has missed the sense of the French. In the second passage the sense is spoilt by translating *caractères* as *characteristics*. This is the English version: 'We ought to look upon ourselves as criminals in a prison that is filled with likenesses of their liberator and instructions to be followed for their escape from bondage; but it must be admitted that these saintly characteristics cannot be perceived without supernatural insight, for, just as all things speak of God to those who know Him, and disclose Him to those who love Him, these same things conceal Him from those who know Him not.' 'Sacred characters' would be far better than 'saintly characteristics'; but better still might be some different phrasing, such as: 'but it must be admitted that this sacred writing cannot be read' In the third passage M. Chevalier writes: 'A partir de la *cinquième Provinciale* se produit un changement de front: Pascal abandonne

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la théologie proprement dite pour la vie commune ' When this is translated : ' Pascal abandoned the theological question proper for the community life,' the sentence is so cast that we are almost bound to read it wrong; and, even if we do get it right, the last phrase is entirely misleading. Our general conclusion is that the task was rather beyond the powers of the translator; and yet, in spite of its faults, the book does convey M. Chevalier's message to us, and we should be churlish not to recognise that and to be grateful for it.

For, to repeat what has been said already, the book is an admirable study of its subject, and that subject is one which eminently deserves our attention. It is very probable that Pascal will not grow less, but more important, as the years advance. If we would have a wise and comprehensive judgment on his life and achievement, we cannot do better than go to M. Chevalier.

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